



Keeping Time

■ ■ TrépanierBaer

Ledger Drawings and the Pictographic Traditions of Native North Americans ca. 1820-1900

June 21 to August 16, 2014

Opening reception: **Saturday, June 21st** from **2:00 pm to 5:00 pm**

Guest Speaker: **Ross Frank**, Director, Plains Indian Ledger Art Project (PILA) and Associate Professor, Ethnic Studies Department, University of California, San Diego

Works by **Kent Monkman** will also be on view, including his 2007 black and white film *Shooting Geronimo*.

TrépanierBaer Gallery

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This exhibition is held in cooperation with the Donald Ellis Gallery, New York

image: **Sioux Medicine Men**, ca. 1875, ink, pencil and watercolour on paper, 21.6 x 28.6 cm

Love and War: The Rise of Plains Ledger Drawings in the Nineteenth Century

The Great Plains was one of the few areas of Aboriginal North America where the passage of linear historical time and the events that marked it were recorded. Artist-historians painted “winter counts” on hides; these were annual emblems that timekeepers chose as the most noteworthy of the prior “winter” or year. Such pictographs—the first horseshoe seen, a figure dotted with the deadly spots of smallpox—were mnemonic devices that unlocked memories of other important historical events for a particular band or tribe. In addition to these collective histories, great warriors and chiefs wore buffalo robes and painted hide shirts upon which were emblazoned their noble deeds. In this manner, such men could appear on special occasions literally cloaked in their own histories. This was a custom that dated back at least to the eighteenth century, as evidenced in hides from early European collections, and those drawn, described and collected by artists George Catlin and Karl Bodmer in the 1830s.

The period from 1870 to 1900 witnessed a tremendous flowering of graphic arts on the Great Plains of North America. It is a paradox that the time of greatest stress on Aboriginal peoples—when the official government policies dictated the virtual extinction of traditions, and the buffalo, other game animals and everything that nourished indigenous cultures was drastically diminished—was also a time of great achievement in the arts. Women produced extraordinary items of clothing, some of it virtually covered with beads. Men made drawings that showed with ethnographic precision the details of camp life, ceremony, warriors, and chiefs that were being radically transformed.

Using newly introduced materials of ink, graphite, colored pencil, and watercolour on paper of various sorts, including discarded ledger and account books, men from Cheyenne, Arapaho, Lakota, Kiowa and other tribes chronicled their histories. Their imagery ranged from brave deeds in horsemanship, inter-tribal warfare and battles with Army soldiers to camp life and courtship. During the early Reservation Era (1870-1920), these artists recorded the life ways that made their cultures so distinctive—life ways that were in danger of being eradicated.

The drawings on display here offer many scenes of Cheyenne men, some identified by name signs that differentiate them, engaging in both love and war. Many such drawings were made as private records by those who had previously recorded their histories in large scale on hide robes and skin shirts. Military officers, trading post owners, and other non-Natives sometimes commissioned Native men who served as scouts for the U. S. Army to draw pictorial records of past and present deeds. The Indian Scouts who worked from 1885-1895 at Fort Reno and Fort Supply in Indian Territory (which would become the state of Oklahoma in 1907) made many drawings in bound ledger books. These ledgers usually had a far more prosaic purpose in military life, recording lists of troops, their riflery records, their food supplies and other details of daily life. But in the hands of Plains warrior-artists who had become employees of the U.S. Army (Indian Scouts), these lined pages became animated with dancers, fighters, and lovers. The individual pages from the so-called Sheridan Ledger, which was likely made at one of these forts during that decade, record the individual histories of some of these scouts.

Such drawings served for both parties as tangible memories of the past. In addition, for their white collectors, these drawings recalled inter-cultural camaraderie, and served as documents of a way of life that was rapidly changing. It is one of the contradictions of late-nineteenth-century life that military men who were instrumental in the conquest and disruption of Native life also sought relics of the life ways they sought to eradicate. By their actions, many reservation-era works of clothing, headdress, drawings, and other arts were carried home.

Army officer John Gregory Bourke, one of the discerning early chroniclers of Plains culture and ceremony, wrote in his diary in 1877 that his Indian scout had told him that, “*it is extremely common for intimate friends to insert in each other's books evidence of mutual esteem by drawing scenes from their past lives*” (to serve about the same purpose as the interchange of photographs and autographs does with us).” A number of the drawings on display here record the military bravery of Cheyenne warriors. In one, a man whose name sign may be Fox or Coyote counts coup with his bow on the shoulder of a white man whose weapon is holstered. In another, a man whose identity would be obvious to his peers because of his dress and distinctive painted shield rides in pursuit of a Pawnee enemy. The enemy displays his adroit horsemanship—shielding his torso from view as he launches an arrow back at his pursuer. These depict very specific incidents, which would then be elaborated in story, for which the drawings served as a kind of memory aid. The recounting of such incidents not only kept history alive in the minds of the men who had experienced it, but also served as an example to a younger generation of what it meant to be a Cheyenne man.

Popular culture continues to remind us of Plains Indian warrior ways, for the horsemanship, bravery, and military prowess of these men have become emblematic of Aboriginality itself in the North American imagination. But another side is revealed here as well, one less often appreciated: the love of social custom and romance that was also a part of Aboriginal manhood on the Great Plains and Prairies. Many of the Sheridan drawings, for example, depict courting customs. In these, we see a different kind of record keeping, one that records tenderness and boastfulness in equal measure. For just as a real man sought to demonstrate bravery in warfare and horse capture, so too was he to show his resolve and decisiveness in matters of the heart.

Among the peoples of the Great Plains, female chastity was highly valued. Therefore, in courtship it was necessary for a man to “capture” his sweetheart, showing the same finesse and boldness he would demonstrate in capturing horses or an enemy. The public way to affirm that a young couple was “going steady” was to walk together wrapped within a man’s large buffalo hide robe, or trade blanket. In fact, in the Lakota language, the phrase *sina aopemni inayinpi* (literally “standing rolled up in a blanket”) is the term for courtship. Such scenes are as common in Kiowa and Cheyenne pictorial narratives as they are in Lakota ones, suggesting that this was a pan-Indian idea.

In the Sheridan drawings, both genders are formally dressed for courtship, sporting the latest in inter-tribal finery. Many wear the red, black or blue woolen blankets with a white selvedge that had been a staple of the Indian trade since the late eighteenth century in the East. Manufactured in Pennsylvania, or England, some of these blankets were locally adorned with beaded blanket strips: men and women sometimes wear plaid, checked, and striped trade cloth, that are further enlivened by tufts of yarn or metal tin cones that made a melodious sound. The most impressive figures wear the colourful and finely made Saltillo serapes from northern Mexico or the Territory of New Mexico, or the highly prized Chief’s Blankets made by Navajo women and traded over long distances across the Great Plains. In each case, the finery that reached the forts and trading posts of Indian Territory demonstrated the cosmopolitan nature of late nineteenth century life on the Southern Plains, where courting couples made themselves handsome, and male artists recorded their memories of a life of freedom in which they captured enemies, hearts, or horses.

JANET CATHERINE BERLO

Janet Catherine Berlo is a scholar of Plains ledger art, and the author of many books and essays on the Indigenous arts of the Americas, including *Plains Indian Drawings 1865-1935: Pages from a Visual History* (1996) and *Native North American Art* (with Ruth Phillips, second edition forthcoming, 2015).